
Celebrating Selma

PILLAR OF THE CALIFORNIA SUPREME COURT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BY KATHRYN MICKLE WERDEGAR*

TO ALL WHO KNOW HER, Selma Moidel Smith is just Selma. Or perhaps “our Selma” or “the famous Selma.” And multitudes know her. Why? Because Selma is one of the most ubiquitous, treasured, talented, tireless and accomplished attorneys any of us could ever know. Admitted to the Bar January 5, 1943, she has been that way for a very long time — I’ll venture longer than most any other attorney in the state, possibly the country.

We have infinite reasons to celebrate Selma. I do so now on the occasion of her 100th birthday, which occurred on April 3. Yes, 100 years — one splendid century.

Where might you find Selma these days? Certainly not reclining on the divan in her pleasant home. Maybe attending the Plácido Domingo concert at the Hollywood Bowl, accompanied on that occasion by her son, a Los Angeles architect. Perhaps attending the meeting of the National Association of Women Lawyers (NAWL) in La Jolla in February where she introduced Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye, Justice Carol Corrigan and myself for a panel on the women of the California Supreme Court. Perhaps at Stanford University for the luncheon recognizing the women in the ABA Women Trailblazers in the Law Oral History Project. Or maybe accepting an award that was created just for her, from the Fellows of the American Bar Foundation. The Fellows had to specially create the award for Selma because none of their existing awards did her justice.

But if you seriously want to find Selma, you would do well to look for her at a board meeting of the California Supreme Court Historical Society. Since being invited to join the board some 18 years ago, Selma has helped transform our low-key organization devoted to the legal history of California into a premier powerhouse of state legal history, recognized nationally for its superb Journal, *California Legal History*, and lively informative Newsletter, both publications elevated and for many years edited by — yes,



SELMA MOIDEL SMITH

Selma. She now devotes herself exclusively to the annual Journal, a substantive publication exploring and preserving the legal history of California, including procuring the oral histories of the justices of our Supreme Court. Most recently, the Journal has published oral histories of Justice Joe Grodin and myself. In the near future we hope to see those of others, including that of former Chief Justice Malcolm M. Lucas. In between Journal duties, Selma initiated and continues to oversee the Historical Society’s annual writing competition for law students to explore subjects relating to the history of California law. It is of course the Selma Moidel Smith Writing Competition,

renamed for Selma at her 95th birthday celebration (<https://www.cschs.org/programs/student-writings>). But the Society doesn’t have an exclusive on that. The National Association of Women Lawyers has created its own Selma Moidel Smith Law Student Writing Competition, devoted specifically to women and the law.

This year, in recognition of her extraordinary contributions to the Historical Society, the Research Travel Grant in California Legal History was established in Selma’s honor. The grant funds will be used to defray the travel and other expenses of graduate students researching California legal history for purposes of preparing an article or other paper and who need to travel to access relevant archival materials. For more information on how to apply, see p. 20.

Law, it must be noted, is not Selma’s only talent and devotion. A gifted composer and musician and an erstwhile flamenco dancer fluent in Spanish, she is a woman of multiple talents. Indeed, her music will soon be performed at Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, and not for the first time. When Selma was introduced at the NAWL meeting in February, we heard a brief recording of Selma playing some of her piano music, waltzes and Latin tangos, preludes and nocturnes. As the attendees applauded, to the delight and, might I say, surprise of all present, Selma rose from her chair on the dais and proceeded to dance gracefully across the stage in rhythm to her music.

* Kathryn Mickle Werdegar is associate justice of the California Supreme Court (Ret.). A version of this article appeared in the *Daily Journal*, March 12, 2019.

Selma's music will be performed by the Los Angeles Lawyers Philharmonic at Disney Hall on Saturday evening, June 29.

Feliz cumpleaños, Selma, and congratulations on this splendid birthday. Heartfelt thanks from all of us who

have had the privilege to know you, to work with you and to experience your energy and vision, your enthusiasm and leadership, all to the immeasurable benefit of our Historical Society and every organization you have ever been a part of. We celebrate you. ★